

Stage Director Sigrid T'Hooft
in an interview with Laura Moeckli

Using Historical Treatises and Iconography in Opera Staging Today

How did you start working with historical staging material? Was there a key experience that inspired you to start staging in this way?

After studying musicology, my further studies and work in the field of historical dance awakened an interest in the historical performance practice of the dancing body and its relation to the singing and acting body in opera. There have been many eye-opening experiences over the years such as Christine Bayle's courses for historical dance and gesture in Paris, a workshop in London in the early nineties where we rehearsed scenes from Händel's *Ariodante* with the musicologist Reinhard Strohm, Dene Barnett's book *The art of gesture: the practices and principles of 18th century acting* (Heidelberg, 1987), and Benjamin Lazar's production of *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* (Paris, 2004), among many others. But most key experiences occurred during my own experiments in historical opera staging. This started with a master-class project at the conservatory of Brussels on eighteenth century opera seria where I prepared a recitative and aria by Johann Adolph Hasse with movements and gestures based on information found in eighteenth century treatises. Gradually I discovered a vast field of sources dealing directly or indirectly with theatre practice. Over the past ten years I have focussed primarily on the stage direction of operatic repertoire from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but I am convinced that similar methods could lead to powerful performances of nineteenth century repertoire as well.

After every new project I did in a historically informed way, I was struck by the intense emotional power of performances in which the oral aesthetic components were matched by the visual ones. This double impact affects all levels: the performer, the audience, the press, those who are extremely suspicious, and those who are happy when they see a historical costume on stage. Of course what we call modern stagings – where presidents, soldiers and nurses crowd the stage with their laptops, automatic guns or high-tech devices – can be highly entertaining and offer valuable interpretations of well-known works. But when historical works of art are reproduced today, it seems obvious to also take an interest in staging principles from the same period including sets, costumes, lights, stage movements and body gestures, in the same way one has regained interest in historical instruments and their practice over the last decades, as a means of discovering both old and new layers of artistic significance within these works.

How would you describe the relation between gestural expression in opera of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and that of the first half of the nineteenth century? How did the practice of stage gesture change over time?

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, gesture was primarily an aspect of rhetoric. It seems to me that hand gestures gradually evolved from their original rhetoric function, emphasising and completing the meaning of each sung or spoken word, towards an aesthetic function where gesture provides a visual characterisation of a specific individual role rather than a general type. This shift is connected to corresponding changes in operatic composition and dramaturgy. Certain practical transformations can be explained by the body taking advantage of being freed of the restrictions of tight corsets and panniers: bigger dimensions, higher positions of the arms, actors lying on the ground, touching each others bodies, more frequently sitting on chairs, et cetera. Although one can observe many changes and aesthetic shifts in the visual and physical treatment of opera staging throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, many aspects of body action and expression seem to have persisted over the centuries. In the early nineteenth century, the evidence suggests that ideals of operatic acting were still largely based on baroque models. It looks as if the style of the opera actors' body movement was in many respects the same for Claudio Monteverdi's first operas as for the Grand opéras of Giacomo Meyerbeer!

It is strange that the opera establishment today generally finds it more and more acceptable when baroque opera is staged in accordance with the music performed, but does not accept classical and romantic operas to be staged using historical performance practice material. The reluctance to consider the long lasting importance of rhetorical gesture in opera and a fear of looking differently at operas that have achieved a well-rooted place in the contemporary repertoire make such experiments difficult to realise. This is even stranger if we remember that the concept of »stage-director« did not even exist in the form we know today before the second half of the nineteenth century.

My recent experiments with late eighteenth and early nineteenth century works – Johann Christian Bach's *Zanaida* (Bad Lauchstädt, 2011), Joseph Haydn's *Arianna a Naxos* (Utrecht, 2011) and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Così fan tutte* (Drottningholm, 2011) – produced results that were so striking, fitting and exiting that I intend to continue working with later repertoire and can hardly wait to see or participate in historically informed performances of works by Rossini, Meyerbeer, Donizetti, Weber or Gounod.

Which sources do you use when preparing a historically informed opera staging? And how do you integrate them in your work? For example: do you give original sources to the singers you work with or do you use them as a background for your own concept?

FIGURE 1 Georg Friedrich Händel:
Amadigi di Gaula, Act I, Scene 3, Aria
 Amadigi »Non sa temere«,
 Göttingen 2012 (© Alciro
 Theodoro da Silva)



FIGURE 2 Georg Friedrich Händel:
Radamisto, 1720 (HWV 12a), Act I,
 Scene 1, Aria Tigrane »Deh!
 Fuggi un traditore«, Karlsruhe
 2009 (© Jacqueline
 Krause-Burberg)



My way of bringing historical performance practice to the stage occurs through a continuous reading and re-reading of the available source material. But then one has to be able to close the books and let the background knowledge of the sources flow into the creative process of making opera that fits into the premises of today. I never bring a book to the first rehearsal! If singers are interested in the questions of historical staging, I provide sources and documents for them to read, but not all singers are interested.

I will not sum up here the vast bibliographical quantity of existing source material that documents the stage-practice of spoken and sung theatre over the centuries. From the anonymous treatise *Il Corago, o vero, Alcune osservazioni per metter bene in scena le composizioni drammatiche*, written around 1630, to Johann Jakob Engel's *Ideen zu einer Mimik* of 1785 and on into the nineteenth century, one finds countless treatises on rhetoric, painting, acting and singing as well as stage design notes, descriptions, reviews, paintings, et cetera which reveal different parts of the puzzle. When preparing a new production I first consider the whole corpus of sources known to me, before focusing on those documents that are particularly relevant for the period in question.

Do you work more with written descriptions or with visual illustrations?

Visual material is in a way more direct, but it can also be more misleading and sometimes requires even more research to be understood than written sources. For example during the rehearsals for *Così fan tutte* (Drottningholm, 2011) we plastered the walls of the rehearsal room with images of iconographic material related to the plays of Carlo Goldoni as a means of inspiration.¹ Removed from their context, some of these pictures became models of scenes and situations in *Così*. Being surrounded by this visual input was very stimulating in this particular case, but historically informed staging does not work through a simple imitation of images – nor of the stage director! Sometimes it is more productive to read descriptions and create one's own images on this basis rather than be confronted directly with a visual illustration which is only a fixed momentary impression. Ideally images and written sources must be considered together; each bringing complementary information that helps understand the other.

Could you describe your work method during rehearsals? What kinds of exercises do you do? How do you build up the rehearsal weeks?

It depends a lot on the technical logistics of each context, but there is usually very little time for rehearsals, maximum six weeks, often less, and that includes musical rehearsals as well as staging. I begin with a general introduction on historical gesture, some talking, explaining and demonstrating body language, but not too much. Often there is no time for more and also I tend to quickly move to practical work so that the questions emerge from that. We also read the opera libretto together to get a feel for the drama of the piece. As much as possible, I build up the *mise en scène* following the chronological order of the scenes, so as to directly feel the opera as a whole with all its transitions. For the first act (or first section) of the opera I create a type of ›acting choreography‹ with quite detailed ideas and gestures for each situation. This phase of mutual learning can be longer or shorter depending on the individual progress of each singer and the collective interaction in the ensembles. During this phase I demonstrate a lot, work with mirroring and direct physical contact in order to transmit physical sensations. The transitions are central, how to get from one attitude and situation to another. Indeed, the pacing of these transitions – whether the succession of movements is slow or fast and how it occurs – is constitutive of the whole expression of a scene and must be developed in a very conscious manner. Of course this work style requires a lot of preparation.

1 For a recent edition and presentation of the engravings illustrating eighteenth century editions of Goldoni's plays see Carlo Goldoni: *Il teatro illustrato nelle edizioni del Settecento*, ed. by Cesare Molinari, Venice 1993, this image on p. 548.



FIGURE 3 Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: *Così fan tutte*, Act II, Scene 1, Aria Despina »Una donna«, Drottningholm 2011 (© Mats Bäcker)



FIGURE 4 Carlo Goldoni: *Le Donne Vendicate*, in: *Drammi giocosi per musica*, vol. 8, Venice 1765

Then from the second act onwards I provide less and less detailed input; I become more of a »staging coach«. Although the borders of the general concept are defined, each singer is given the freedom to develop their role according to their own intuitions and physical possibilities – just as it was done in the early nineteenth century! This is sometimes very difficult for stage assistants who have to adapt not only to my indications, but to those of all the singers as well! Singers on the other hand seem to feel very quickly at ease with this method. They appreciate the initial precise personal direction, followed by the freedom of following their newly trained intuitions, and the overall implicit connection to the music that results from a historically informed approach.

What kind of singers do you work with? Are they generally experienced in the use of historical gesture or not? How do professional singers react to your work and bring these new aspects in connection with their »classical« training?

Originally no one really had any experience. Now I have the possibility of sometimes suggesting or choosing the people I want to work with. Still, usually the performers are more unfamiliar than familiar with historical gesture. Occasionally people are not talented for this type of work. Sometimes singers are basically very talented but cannot make the step to really integrating this work in their bodies to the extent that they can learn to improvise. Sometimes when singers continue to take lessons with their own coach during the time of rehearsals they become caught between conflicting opinions. When singers experience vocal problems they may blame the stage direction, but this is not specific to working with historical gesture! Singers are often incredibly centred on the upper part of their vocal apparatus, on the face, throat and chest. When they are given precise physical activity, they usually forget about technique and the vocal apparatus so that their body

becomes a wonderful framework for the voice to develop freely. One never knows in advance how the different sensibilities will come together in a performance, but so far I believe every singer has acquired some positive input from working with a historically inspired approach; most of the time it is perceived as an enhancement, the whole mechanics of historical staging becoming an enrichment, even for vocal technique.

One of the treatises you have studied is Johannes Jelgerhuis' »Theoretische Lessen over de gesticulatie en de mimiek«. How does this less well known source compare to other treatises of the time, for example Gilbert Austin's »Chironomia« or Johann Jacob Engel's »Ideen zu einer Mimik«?²

This treatise by the Dutch actor and painter Johannes Jelgerhuis (1770–1836) was published in Amsterdam in 1827. It is written in Flemish, which offers an interesting occasion for comparing the terminology with other European theorists, but there is also an English translation by Alfred S. Golding dating from 1984. Jelgerhuis' double occupation as a painter and an actor is central to his vision of the theatre; he describes the actor's movements as a series of painted positions and refers to painting treatises by Karel van Mander (1548–1610), Charles Le Brun (1619–1690) and Gerard de Lairese (1640–1711). Where and how Jelgerhuis received his education as an actor is not known with certainty, but he studied as an apprentice in the painter-decorator workshop of the Theatre of Amsterdam. In 1791 Jelgerhuis joined the Van Dinsen Theatre in Rotterdam before being hired by the Amsterdam Theatre where he played more than two hundred roles between 1805 and 1834. At the same time, he regularly exhibited his art, published books of sketches and taught drama. Written towards the end of his career, Jelgerhuis' *Lessons on Mime and Gesture* offer a broad retrospective of Dutch and European stage and art practice at the turn of the century; they don't really tell us anything new but rather confirm the principal ideas found throughout Europe at this time.

Compared to Austin's *Chironomia*, the *Lessons* have the advantage of being conceived explicitly for the stage. Austin was not a theatre man, his treatise was never used in a theatrical context and his system was highly normative rather than descriptive. Nevertheless, many things he describes are again confirmed in other sources and his system for describing movement can help to think about the body as a whole rather than just individual hand or arm gestures. Engel on the other hand was in direct contact with the

2 Johannes Jelgerhuis: *Theoretische Lessen over de gesticulatie en mimiek*, Amsterdam 1827 (English Translation: Alfred Siemon Golding: *Classicistic Acting. Two Centuries of a Performance Tradition at the Amsterdam Schouwburg*, to which is appended an annotated translation of the »Lessons on the Principles of Gesticulation and Mimic Expression« of Johannes Jelgerhuis, Washington 1984); Gilbert Austin: *Chironomia or a Treatise on Rhetorical Delivery*, London 1806; Johann Jacob Engel: *Ideen zu einer Mimik*, Berlin 1786.



FIGURE 5 Jelgerhuis in the role of King Lear, 1805, Aquarel 150×110 mm, Toneelmuseum, Amsterdam



FIGURE 6 Approved arm movements in Jelgerhuis' *Theoretische Lessen*, Plate 20

theatre as an actor and author, so all the beautiful figures and descriptions in his *Ideen zu einer Mimik* are possible examples for the stage, rather than general aesthetic concepts.

Can you give us an idea of what kind of information one finds in Jelgerhuis' »Lessons« that is useful for contemporary stage directing?

The book contains thirty-nine lessons devoted to stage action and costumes, illustrated with ninety-three plates designed by Jelgerhuis himself. The author introduces the stage of the Amsterdam Schouwburg with its perspective and the slope of the podium, the proportion of the room decor and lighting, which serves as a backdrop in order to present the actors in action. He then describes and illustrates the stage walk, various positions and attitudes, hand movements and facial expression. The concept of »welstand« is used over and over throughout the treatise, indicating a combination of balance, grace and nobility, in posture, gesture and mime, but also the proportion (not too much, not too little) of each of these elements. Each actor must find this »true proportion« to make his audience believe what he is expressing through his body language. Jelgerhuis' models for gestures of the hands and body are entirely based on those of classical sculpture and art of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, confirming the continuing traditions of *contraposto*, asymmetry, curved lines, et cetera.

For Jelgerhuis the face speaks through mime (for Austin face is more the realm of voice). One has to control the direction of the eyes and the inclination of the head so that



FIGURE 7 Georg Friedrich Händel: *Amadigi di Gaula*, Göttingen 2012 (© Alciro Theodoro da Silva)



FIGURE 8 Expression of pain in Jelgerhuis' *Theoretische Lessen*, Plate 47

»welstand« can be obtained. He also recommends Charles Le Brun's catalogue for an explanation of how the different parts of the face may express contempt, regret, fear, jealousy, desolation, sorrow, joy or pity. In addition to the chin, mouth, nose and forehead, he talks about the refined game of the eyebrows, nose-wings, mouth corners, nose-holes, cheeks, et cetera and how to enhance their power through appropriate make-up.

The last two lessons are entirely devoted to costumes and reveal that the personal responsibility of the actor towards his costume still remained valid, although he warns against the growing nonchalance with which the actors of his time chose their costumes. So the actors determined their costumes as well as their stage positions and body attitudes; they were entirely responsible for the external characterization of the role they were interpreting, and for Jelgerhuis, it is these external forms and techniques that were important rather than internal or psychological causes: »Het betaamt mij hier minder de inwendige oorzaken na te gaan, maar te doen opmerken wat de uiterlijke vertoning is.«³

Jelgerhuis proposes a study program for the actor: the apprentice must first master the art of entering onto the stage, of standing, walking, and sitting; he then practices these actions under prescribed, simplified conditions. Thereupon the teacher shows him how to express a series of common dramatic emotions with their appropriate body movements and gestures. When the student is able to duplicate these actions without seeming too graceful (like a dancer) or too life-like (too imitative of off-stage conduct), he is instructed in the art of rendering the facial expressions of these emotions. He recommends that his students analyse all the positions carefully, imagine them in their mind, then imitate them in the silence and solitude, or until the positions become part of their personal body repertoire so that they can then be used when needed. He concludes his

3 »It concerns me less to examine the internal causes, than to notice what is the external display.« Jelgerhuis: *Theoretische Lessen over de gesticulatie en mimiek*, p. 134.



FIGURE 9 Sigrid T'Hooft with the contralto Delphine Galou during rehearsals of *Radamisto*, Karlsruhe 2009 (© Badisches Staatstheater Karlsruhe)

lessons with the positions of the feet and to what extent the actor must learn the art of fencing and dance.

What is particularly striking in Jelgerhuis' approach is his preoccupation with transition and his attempts to show the succession of movements from one position to another; he explains that changes from one position to another can produce different expressions. Also, positions, gestures and facial expressions only obtain their full meaning in combination with each other, and each small shift has consequences for the body language as a whole.

Finally, how can one make theatre out of theories? Respectively, how can one use static images to create dynamic modern operatic performances?

You mean how does one make it come to life, how does the magic work? It is hard to answer. For me it is a combination of being a musician and a dancer myself, which means I always use the music to find ways of moving from one situation to another. This experience helps to understand what a fluid body transition means, how to develop a gesture and achieve the required circularity of movement for historical stage performance. It is intuitive to me as a historical dancer that rounded arm movements are the natural elegant way of moving whereas any brusque, halting or angular movements have a comic effect in this context. So these historical traditions have become integrated in my body through my own practice over the years and then it is a matter of transmitting these sensations to the people I work with.

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SÄNGER ALS SCHAUSPIELER

Zur Opernpraxis des 19. Jahrhunderts in Text, Bild und
Musik • Herausgegeben von Anette Schaffer, Edith Keller,
Laura Moeckli, Florian Reichert und Stefan Saborowski

MUSIKFORSCHUNG DER
HOCHSCHULE DER KÜNSTE BERN

Herausgegeben von Martin Skamletz

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